Externalities are the negative byproducts of an action that are difficult to measure in monetary terms. Environmental degradation is an often neglected externality. By driving an automobile rather than walking, you might be contributing to the pollution of the environment. You might also be less physically fit as a result of your decision to drive rather than walk to school.

B. Guy Peters, professor of American government at the University of Pittsburgh, writing in the seventh edition of his text *American Public Policy: Promise and Performance*, says that cost benefit analysis provides an unsatisfactory basis for political decisions. Peters refers to cost benefit analysis as “the functional equivalent of witchcraft in the public sector” because “there are so many assumptions involved in the calculations, and so many imponderables about the future effects of projects.” He says that it is impossible to place an economic value on things like life, health, and endangered species. Cost benefit analysis is worthwhile, according to Professor Peters, only when it is integrated with other forms of ethical analysis.

Cost benefit analysis works best when a very specific plan is under consideration—for instance, a proposal to build a new bridge or a presidential candidate’s plan to provide health insurance for uninsured Americans. But Lincoln-Douglas debate doesn’t involve the presentation of specific plans or proposals; instead one value is compared to another value in a variety of public policy contexts.

FURTHER READING

Baird, Robert M. *Socrates in the Forum: The Role of Philosophy in Lincoln-Douglas Debate.* Indianapolis, IN: National Federation of High Schools, 1995.

Polk, Lee R., William B. English, and Eric Walker. *The Value Debate Handbook, 6th Ed.* Waco, TX: Baylor Briefs, 2000.